

SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
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**RICHARD GROOMER OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS, SPEEA**

**INTERVIEWEE:** RICHARD GROOMER

**INTERVIEWER:** CINDY COLE

**SUBJECTS:** PLATO; SOCRATES; MARX; BERRYPICKING; ANTI-VIETNAM WAR MOVEMENT; LUMBER MILL; LUMBER WORKER; WORKPLACE INJURIES; WORKPLACE FATALITIES; PACIFISM; BOEING; FORENSIC SCIENTIST; DIATOMS IN PUGET SOUND; ANTI-RACISM; FOLK MUSIC; ANTI-WAR ACTIVISM; MUSICAL STORYTELLING; SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL ENGINEERING EMPLOYEES IN AEROSPACE; 2000 BOEING ENGINEERS STRIKE; BOEING-MCDONNELL DOUGLAS MERGER; UNION SOLIDARITY

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is a recording for the Seattle Labor Chorus Oral History Project. I am recording Richard Groomer on December 17, 2015. The interviewer is Cindy Cole. Richard, why don't you tell me a little bit about your family history, and then anything else you'd like to convey.

[00:00:30] **RICHARD GROOMER:** Sure. I was born in a family that had seven children. I was born in Port Angeles, Washington, which was a milltown. No longer a milltown. From my early childhood, I was my father's helper. We worked on projects around the house, but my father was also always trying to get extra jobs. I remember probably at the age of seven going and steaming wallpaper off someone's house, and helping him paint.

I started working at my own jobs when I was young, too. I sold newspapers. I had my first job when I lived away from home and I was eleven years old. I worked for a charter fishing boat at La Push. Lived away from home for the summer, probably the best summer of my life.

I went to Catholic school, and I think the Catholic school was really important in shaping my attitudes. One of my nuns, I think when I was in the second grade, would read stories. One of the books that she read to us was the story of migrant farm workers struggling to survive in America. I was an avid reader. I started reading philosophy when I was in grade school. Plato was a big influence, and I learned something about the Socratic method. I also read Marx.

When I got into junior high school, the public school, in the early 60s, at that time the Vietnam War was beginning to heat up. There was a debate at our school between the merits of capitalism versus the evils of Communism. I volunteered to debate and won the debate for the merits of Communism. [laughing] Afterwards, they sent me to the school psychiatrist once a week for the year, where I had Rorschach inkblot tests to try and figure out what was wrong with this kid that he would do such a thing.

But I had other jobs when I was young, which I think helped to form my character. One of those jobs, I was a caretaker at a farm that was owned by a man who would just come out on the weekends. I had the place to myself for a couple of years, and I had my own space. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed the country.

I was a berrypicker. I learned something about the difficulties that agricultural workers face. I remember one day I went berrypicking with two of my friends and we didn't like the fact that we weren't getting anything for our work, so we walked off the fields, and the farmer came after us with a pickup truck, yelling that he had paid good money to bring us out to our fields and we had damn well better work for him. [laughing] He ran down the road we were on and we had jump into a ditch.

When I got older, in high school, I played in a rock 'n' band. One of the important events in my life was in 1966 when some university students came to do some leafleting about the war in Vietnam. The police arrested them, but before they took them away, my friend and I collected all their literature, and then we became the people passing out the literature.

I had a girlfriend whose mother worked for a union that was breaking away from their international union. It was the West Coast Pulp and Paper Workers Union. They had an old mimeograph machine that I got for the purpose of printing an antiwar little newsletter. So, we got some practice there.

My friend that I speak about was also very important in my life. He came from a big, extended black family. We lived very close together. His parents had an open door policy. Anyone was welcome in their house, and it was a wonderful experience to be included in an intact black family. We had our rock 'n' roll band, we had a black singer backed up by four white guys. It introduced controversy in the school that I was attending. [chuckles] It was a good time, though.

Later on, that friend and I had lots of political activities together. I remember in 1970 doing some antiwar organizing with him. The following year, one year after the invasion of Cambodia, we went to Washington, D.C. We traveled around the country collecting petitions for the People's Peace Treaty. We arrived in Washington for a month of protests.

I went to work at an office that was providing housing for demonstrators coming to Washington, D.C., a completely eye-opening experience. We provided housing for one million people in a month. People would just

walk into this office and pass us their keys to their townhouse saying, “Put as many people there as you can.” It was a wonderful experience of seeing a vibrant political community, where people would work together.

At the end of the month, we were rested. We were part of the Washington, D.C. where 14,000 people were arrested in one day. We were arrested in Mount Vernon Square. We were held in a little park with a short iron fence around it. I remember this very clearly. There was an elderly black citizen of Washington, D.C. who came down the street and walked up to the cops and says, “What are these people doing inside there?” The cop says, “You don’t want to be messing with these people. They’re against the war.” And the old guy looked at the cop and said, “Well, I’m going to join them.” [laughing] He stepped across the fence and got arrested.

Also at that time—here’s a great story—we were held in an athletic football field that had barbed wire surrounding it, National Guard troops, several thousand people. They weren’t content just to have us surrounded by barbed wire and guns. They threw in teargas while we were in there. It got pretty tense for a while. And we saw a motorcade that drove up to the entrance of this field. All these black Cadillacs came very, very slowly up to the front gates, and they stopped. The doors opened up. It was the leadership of the black community of Washington, D.C., and in their trunks, they had buckets of fried chicken. They said, “Welcome to the struggle.” [laughing]

These were good stories.

I went to work in a lumber mill. I worked in a mill that at one time had maybe 1,000 workers. It was tough, rough work. I didn’t have any real skills. I learned a lot from the experience. I learned that people stuck together. And there were lots of people who had been professionals that had joined the ranks of the blue-collar workers because you could be free. You didn’t have work that you had to take home on the weekends. It was more black and white. We knew who our friends were and we knew who our friends weren’t.

At that time I had been part of the antiwar movement for some time, and tried antiwar organizing, and dipped my toe in radical union work. I learned some important lessons. One of them was that people remembered that during an earlier era, sometimes the labor organizers weren’t sensitive to the issues of people on the floor in the mill. And so I got a lesson from the old-timers about not just spouting ideology but listening to issues about worker safety and things like that.

I had a tragic accident. During the time that I had worked in the lumber mill—which was three and a half years—there were three people killed on the job. One day a machine caught my hand and pulled me inside it, and I had my arm separated at the elbow. It was a Friday night. The ambulance came, took me to the hospital. I was in surgery all night long. The next morning, when I was wheeled out of the recovery room, high on drugs, the mill superintendent was waiting for me and had a paper for me to sign. He told me I would be back at work on Monday morning; that he had talked to my doctors and it was fine. I couldn’t use my arm for a year. I was picked up by a driver and driven to a nurse’s station, where I laid on a gurney all day long in a cast. They had taken my morphine away from me. That was to protect the company from lost time compensation.

When it was time for me to go back to work, I had another idea. I had read a book by a pacifist who had been one of the founding members of kind of a Quaker peace community in Philadelphia, and I decided that rather than go back to work, I was going to join the pacifist community. So I moved to Philadelphia, and I actually had a disappointing experience because I came from a more blue-collar orientation, and I found out that most of the people in this pacifist community were experimenting radical lifestyles. That wasn’t my idea of politics.

So, I returned to school. For some reason, I took a chemistry class one summer and thought it was the hardest thing I’d ever done, so I decided to become a chemist. I went to community college. I was given a scholarship

in chemical engineering to the University of Washington, but when I came to collect my scholarship, the apologized and said, “I’m sorry but we gave the money away.”

So, I found a job at Boeing. Luckily, this was an old-time American company. I did not have a degree, but I had been recommended by someone who had a Ph.D., and they hired me without an interview. I spent 25 years there. I had a good career.

In the company that I worked in, which doesn’t exist anymore due to corporate mergers, if a person could do something, you were allowed to do it. So I worked on a number of projects that I was really proud of. I worked on the Hubble space telescope. I was the first employee in their environmental laboratory that monitored effluents coming out of their sites. I did other work in materials and in the processes of manufacturing.

But one day, I saw another opportunity. There was a man who is a forensic scientist who worked near me. I got interested in his work because it was completely unlike anything I had done. I went into his laboratory at night and read his books, and thought that I would like to work for him. So, I bought myself a research microscope—I spent about \$20,000 on this—and I got good, and he hired me. I spent the next 15 years doing very satisfying work.

My specialty was looking at complicated problems in whatever context they were in—hard to explain this, but my first job involved a case where the company thought one of their executives had been poisoned in a hotel room in Mongolia. They had a pinch of dust, and gave me the pinch of dust. I determined that the hotel staff had sprayed insecticide to clean up the room and that’s what made the executive sick.

But a host of other unusual jobs. It took me around the world, at least in terms of my work. Sometimes were were called on to find where in the world something had happened, and we could do that by looking at the pollen count. Sometimes I did experiments on the U.S. Space Station. I did experiments on Mir. Just very satisfying.

Actually, a lifetime of working on something like this changes one’s perspective. After I left Boeing, I volunteered on a project at the University of Washington studying diatoms in Puget Sound. My intent was to identify all the species that live in our inland waterway, which had not been studied systematically. I should also mention that the reason why this is important is that plankton, of which the diatoms are part of, produce 60 percent of the oxygen. And recent studies have indicated that their numbers are declining worldwide. This is a much bigger problem than the Amazon rainforest, for example, but there’s no funding for it.

I’m trying to think. A lifetime of work brings up lots of stories. But some of the things that were important to me, as a young man, I didn’t quite realize. For instance, my father was from New Orleans. He left when he was 18 years old. He had not any education to speak of. He had worked for a jeweler on Canal Street with another young man. These two young men had a fancy lifestyle. My dad told me he used to have two tuxedos, one that was always in the cleaners, and would go out to see the big bands when they were playing in town.

But he told me that there was an old black man who also worked there who never got to enjoy those things in life, and that when he was off work from working in the jewelry store, he was driving the rich businessmen around town. He left when he was a young man because he hated racism. In my house, the earliest music I can tell you that I really remember was Harry Belafonte. My father played Harry Belafonte all the time.

The lessons of those songs permeated my early childhood, as when I got involved in the antiwar movement, it was the folk music that drove me there. I saw Peter, Paul and Mary perform at the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., and I saw the crowd stirred. Music is a big deal. We have to be able to tell stories.

Some of the other stories that we could relate. I guess this is a story. When I was working for Boeing, we went on strike in 2000. SPEEA [Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace] was a union that had never been out on strike. The engineers and the technicians used to think of themselves as being professionals. Because they never went out on strike, the machinists always got a better contract than the engineers did.

After the merger with McDonnell Douglas, when the company radically changed its philosophy—oh, I should tell you, one of the things they said after the merger was “Research? We don’t do research. We buy research.” Meaning graduate students who’ll work for free and the universities were who they were going to rely on. In the building I worked in, we had engineers from Russia that we were supposed to train to do our jobs. The undercurrent was not good. People were getting fed up.

I was part of a small group of people who actually went around, inside the plants, and talked to people about “No, it’s time we actually take a stand.” So the day of the strike, people walked off the job. This was in Renton. They walked off the job and they went down to that football field a couple blocks away. They filled the football field. People started driving from other Boeing sites—from Plant 2, from Everett, from Auburn—and pretty soon the whole field was full of people who were just looking at each other saying, “Wow. Look at this!”

The first couple of days out on the picket lines, people weren’t exactly sure what to do or how to conduct themselves because they were engineers. Everyone had their pocket protectors with them and their calculators. They started leaving those behind, and something that happened is that other workers would show up—the machinists in particular—and say, “We’re finally seeing you guys stand up!” People would come by who were carpenters, or Teamsters—lots of Teamsters because they were driving trucks—would stop by and they’d say, “Well, we went out and bought a bunch of pizzas for you guys. Here you are.”

Another friend of mine went with me to the picket. I, by the way, became picket captain because it was just so much fun. But when I wasn’t on picket duty, I was at the union office. And the telephone would ring constantly. There would be truck drivers saying, “Boeing has rented a warehouse for a delivery because they can’t get into their own company warehouses. So I’m on my way there, and if you get there before I do and throw up a picket line, I’m not going to cross.”

Lots of excitement. Another thing that happened, some guy drove over from Eastern Washington with a whole truckload of food, and gave it out. That was amazing.

Another thing, one day I was at the union headquarters. We got a phone call from hotel workers. Downtown, the Boeing Board of Directors was having a meeting at a hotel. The hotel workers called to tell us, so the union, we called the company and said, “Is this true?” And they said, “No, no, no, it’s not true.” About 1,000 people showed up and surrounded the hotel, and the police came and said, “Okay, what’s going on here?” We explained to them that we were on strike and that the Boeing Board of Directors was meeting upstairs. The cops said, “We’ll see what we can do about that.” They went inside, went upstairs and talked to the Board and said, “We’ve got some people out here you’ve got to talk to.”

This is what can happen. This is a movement. This is people relying on each other because we know we’re all in the same boat. A lot of the people who went out on strike were not very political, or even right-wingers, but they realized that this was something about their own lives.

That has continued to inform me. I had a good long career. I had good benefits. I had someone to watch my back. I had people to negotiate contracts for me. I think that is something everybody should be able to look forward to. Today, now we are seeing people who have never had unions, people who work in the worst conditions, standing up. I think that’s exciting.

[00:28:56] **CINDY:** This is great. I'd like you to maybe talk a little bit more about your music, and what brought you to the Seattle Labor Chorus? I know you mentioned a little.

[00:29:10] **RICHARD:** I'm not much of a joiner, but, as I told you, I realized that music had a particular edge that it can lend to something, where we have to explain a lot of things to people. We have to tell people about what their history is. We have to tell people that you need to stand up for yourself. And the best way of doing that is to tell them the stories of how this has happened before, and to give them a song that they can sing.

At one of our strike assemblies, I remember telling them, "Make sure when you're kicking their ass, you do it with a song in your heart." [laughter]

I had seen the chorus on occasions and always thought, well, that's something I could do. But I'm actually a shy person and it took a while. I have performed in musical groups that played rock 'n' roll. I played in a jazz band for a couple of years. I played in a band that did folk music from the Mexico-Texas border region. [Panhundo?]

I know that music has a terrific power, and when I joined the chorus, I was surprised at how much I learned. We have a director who really works us, and in the chorus, we have accomplished a lot more than I ever accomplished in any of my musical endeavors before. I think that there's a future for the chorus. We have a lot of people that have to organize, we have a lot of people that we have to tell stories to.

[00:31:29] **CINDY:** Is there anything more that you'd like to say?

[00:31:33] **RICHARD:** I don't know.

[00:31:36] **CINDY:** Okay, that's great. Thank you.